



Innovations in Contemporary Indian Dance: From Religious and Mythological Roots in Classical Bharatanatyam

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian Dance as a new multi-layered dance genre unfolds at the intersection of Indian classical dance and other movement vocabularies such as modern dance, yoga, martial arts, and theatre techniques. This three-part essay traces a brief history of the “revival” of bharatanatyam in late 19th and early 20th century, then discusses the work of pioneers in Contemporary Indian Dance, Chandralekha, Anita Ratnam, and Hari Krishnan. Discussion includes a redefinition of the sacred, use of Indian goddesses and epic stories for contemporary relevance, as well as the subverting of stereotypes of gender, culture, and nation in Contemporary Indian Dance.

Expressive arts such as music and dance in the Hindu tradition constitute integral parts of ritual worship and daily devotional practices for many worshippers in India. In particular, the history of temple dance performed by *devadasis* or temple dancers (discussed below) provides significant antecedents for Contemporary Indian Dance, a new multi-layered and hybrid genre used increasingly since the 1980s in India and the diaspora (with early 20th century pioneer Uday Shankar (Chakravorty & Khokar 1984)). This new style is rooted mainly in two of the eight classical Indian dance styles, bharatanatyam and kathak.¹ This essay presents an innovative intervention in Religious Studies via my analysis of selected Contemporary Indian dancers’ choreography and their reinterpretations of traditional Indian religious and mythological stories. Further, my critical analysis of these artists’ contemporary choreography using abstract movement versus narrative, deploying the body as a sacred space brings illuminations to scholars of Religion.

In this essay, I analyze the work (1970s to early 2000) of the late pioneer Chandralekha whom I describe as a foremother of Contemporary Indian Dance. Contemporary Indian dancers like Chandralekha may adopt a secular emphasis via abstract movement rather than classical Indian dances’ traditional use of religious and epic stories from the prominent Indian epics, *The Ramayana*, and *The Mahabharata*. Chandra (as she was commonly called) rejected the religious iconography of classical bharatanatyam as well as stories from myths and epics. Rather, she deployed deeply resonant abstract movement and martial arts executed by the body. Chandra’s focus on the physical body itself as a sacred space, a vehicle (as in yoga) to reach a higher realm, embodies a commingling of the sensual and spiritual that is an integral part of Indian aesthetics and philosophical systems.

I also discuss two other Contemporary Indian dancers who collaborate transnationally—Chennai-based Anita Ratnam and Toronto-based Hari Krishnan – who reinvent religious icons and mythical stories giving them contemporary, gendered, even feminist relevance. Their re-interpretations of traditional myths and epic stories are rendered often via abstract movement (demonstrating Chandra’s influence, subtle if not overt). Ratnam, differently from Chandra, recuperates the representation of religious icons especially goddess

figures in her choreography. However, these female divinities embody a unique kind of sacredness (different from traditional *bhakti*, i.e. devotion expressed in classical *bharatanatyam*) that Ratnam delineates as the “feminine transcendental” (discussed below) relevant for contemporary women, even feminists among today’s artists, spectators and the general community. As she remarks:

The strength of the spiritual and the inspiration of the mythological are undeniable. Mythology is not outside of us and part of some distant past. Divinities and heroes come into our homes. ... So when I dance and tune into those kinds of stories and images, I only use them as springboards and keep asking myself, ‘What do I have to say as a dancer, today?’
Anita Ratnam (2010)

The following discussion proceeds as follows: (1) a brief introduction to Contemporary Indian Dance and its use of religious icons and hybrid movement vocabularies; (2) the contested history of the “revival” of *bharatanatyam* in late 19th and early 20th centuries; (3) Chandralekha’s abstract innovations where the body itself is sacred; and (4) Anita Ratnam and Hari Krishnan’s contemporary engagement with goddesses and epic stories.

Introduction to Contemporary Indian Dance

India’s rich heritage of dance and music has a long history with impact of royal families and patrons of the arts in pre-British colonial times, followed by British colonialism (mid-18th century onwards), then into the postcolonial era (after India’s independence from the British in 1947) and contemporary 21st century. *Bharatanatyam*’s movement vocabulary constituted of *nritta* (abstract foot-work), *mudras* (hand gestures), and *abhinaya* (gesture language, facial and bodily) along with its roots in Hindu religion, mythology, and the two major Indian epics that often inspire Contemporary Indian dancers who are trained often in one or other of the classical dance styles.

Most commonly, *bharatanatyam* and *kathak* based dancers create Contemporary Indian dance – a vibrant form that unfolds at the intersection of classical Indian dance with other movement vocabularies from an Indian and a global sensibility – yoga, martial arts, modern, postmodern dance, ballet, hip-hop, theatrical elements, and jazz – influenced, since the 1990s by globalization and the internet. Contemporary idioms unfold at the intersection of classical and modern, old and new (see Katrak 2011).

Hybrid choreography uses Indian dance *mudras* for abstract contemporary dance, or gives modern re-interpretations to Indian epic and mythological stories. Contemporary Indian dancers may evoke the religious base of classical *bharatanatyam* even as they re-invent, in tune with today’s concerns with gender and sexuality, ethnicity and nationality, notions of *bhakti* (devotion) and mythic-religious figures in ways markedly different from early 20th century artists when nationalism and anti-colonial rhetoric directed the recuperation and celebration of classical Indian dance.

Today, Contemporary Indian dance is practiced globally with artists such as Mumbai-based Astad Deboo, awarded the Indian government’s Padma Shri for his pioneering contributions to this style, Chennai-based Anita Ratnam, Trivandrum-based Daksha Sheth, Delhi-based Aditi Mangaldas, Ahmedabad-based Mallika Sarabhai, and other artists in the global diaspora such as London-based Shobana Jeyasingh, Akram Khan, Toronto-based Hari Krishnan, Lata Pada, Ottawa-based Natasha Bakht, Los Angeles-based Sheetal Gandhi, the Post *Natyam* Collective, among others.

Multiple Contestations of Bharatanatyam's "Revival"

The "stories" from late 19th and early 20th centuries about bharatanatyam's "rebirth" come from many players—colonialist–Orientalists, nationalists, and Brahmins – with different socio-cultural and political agendas in "classicizing" Indian arts. A key paradox lies at the heart of these versions: social reformers and revivalists engaged simultaneously in both the prohibition and rescue of the very same art form. Moralistic reformers wished to eradicate, even through legislation, the institution of *devadasis* (temple dancers) dedicated to temples in Southern India as though they were all prostitutes.² Some of them were forced into prostitution for survival when patronage for the *devadasis* decreased.

The *devadasi* dance called *sadir* or *dasiattam* in devotional expression of *sringara* (love) for the temple deity uniquely brought together the spiritual with the sensual, even erotic that was often misunderstood both by moralistic Victorian British colonizers and by Indian elites who judged the *devadasis'* life-style as disreputable. Ironically, the same revivalists who wanted to wipe out the *devadasi* dance tradition simultaneously wanted to salvage the art in a form "respectable" to them as in renaming *sadir* as bharatanatyam. Neither colonizers nor Indian reformers wished to recognize that *devadasis* belonged to hereditary communities of artists who excelled in dance and music. Ignoring the specific history and location of *sadir*, they invented and ascribed notions of "purity," "classicism," and "ancientness" to the "new" dance form. Avanthi Meduri's essay, "Bharata Natyam – What are You?" usefully notes that for hereditary *devadasi* artists, dance "was a living tradition that fused belief with practice" Meduri (1988). When the reformers "elevated" the dance's status by having "respectable" families take it over, the *devadasi* herself was "rudely dismissed, while the dance itself, like the mythical phoenix" remarks Meduri, "rose from the ashes."

In recuperating traditional dance, revivalist zeal was fuelled by the prevalent British colonial climate of the late 19th century that judged most aspects of Indian culture and religion as backward, driven by superstition and blind faith. This partly influenced social reformers to counter colonizers' ignorance to demonstrate a new form of Indian modernity rooted in ancient, even timeless Indian culture distinct from western modernity. This endeavor to invent, even "culturally engineer" an Indian past within which classical Indian dance belonged was part of a complex process undertaken mostly by upper-caste Brahmins and other educated elites; effectively, they marginalized *sadir's* actual community of practitioners (Allen 1997; Coorlawala 1996; O'Shea 1988, 2007). "The genealogy of the classical in modernity and its location in the spiritualized inner realm of the indigenous," remark Indira Viswanathan Petereson and Davesh Soneji in an excellent revisionary history "suggest why upper-caste elites and middle-class nationalists became the chief engineers of the classicization of indigenous dance and music in both northern and southern India."³

Whereas traditional practitioners once practiced their art in temples and courts, and had mobility between these spaces, the practitioners of the new "high" art now performed on the proscenium stage. This new, modern form of traditional dance had to project itself as "simultaneously traditional and modern" (*Performing Pasts*, 7).

In the late 18th century, the Maratha courts of Thanjavur (in Tamil Nadu) fostered the development of music and dance with varying regional and external influences.⁴ Much of the future destiny of the "classical" traditions like bharatanatyam and Carnatic music were forged in the city of Madras (now called Chennai), the capital of the British Madras Presidency.⁵

One key player in bharatanatyam's "revival" was Rukmini Devi Arundale who institutionalized bharatanatyam with her establishment of Kalakshetra Dance Academy in 1936

(see Meduri, 2005, Samson 2010). Devi “purified” *sadir*-cum-bharatanatyam and replaced sensuality with religious emphasis in the dance’s overall affect. This raised objections, especially regarding the representation of *sringara* (love in various manifestations – as mother, lover, devotee) from one of the legendary dancers, T. Balasaraswati (often called Bala) who belonged to a *devadasi* family. She stated: “the *sringara* [sic] we experience in bharata natyam is never carnal – never, never. For those who have yielded themselves to this discipline with total dedication, dance like music is the practice of presence, it cannot merely be the body’s rapture.” (Pattabhi Raman & Ramachandran 1984) Bala asserted forthrightly: “there is nothing in Bharatha Natyam which can be purified afresh; it is divine and is innately so.” Janet O’Shea explains that Bala “argued for an untainted erotic-aesthetic-sacred continuum as the heritage of the *devadasi* dance, and one not to be confused with a vulgar eroticism” (Quoted in *Performing Pasts*, 18). Bala in her turn described this “Brahminized” dance as “vulgar.” These divergent views are part of bharatanatyam’s history and evolution (Balasaraswati 1988).

Even as individuals like Devi were successful in institutionalizing bharatanatyam, many hereditary practitioners were marginalized. A great talent like Balasaraswati, although she performed and taught in Madras (1940s–50s), was soon to devote her energies to teaching outside India, mainly in the U.S. (Cowdery 1995)

Chandralekha: A Pioneering Foremother of Contemporary Indian Dance

In her wholly original choreography (1970s–early 2000s), the late Chandralekha who had trained in bharatanatyam, rejected what she regarded as its superficial religiosity and emphasis on the overly decorated dancer in silk sari and jewelry. She elected to work with *abstract movement* and Indian martial arts, regarding the vehicle of the physical body, especially the spine that she spoke about as central, as a precious resource not only for performance but as much for a balanced life. Through the body’s ability to assume abstract geometrical positions that she created in movement, she brought together physical sensuality and inner connectedness of the body, mind and spirit as in yoga. Chandra’s many works began with *Angika* (1985) and ended with *Sharira* (2001) – both translate as “body.” *Sharira* “celebrates the living body in which sexuality, sensuality and spirituality co-exist” (Program Notes). “Body corporeal and body conceptual” is an accurate description of *Sharira*. (Menon nd)

Uniquely, Chandra relied only on Indian movement and martial arts traditions, aesthetics and philosophy, what scholar Rustom Bharucha calls the “Indian psychophysical tradition” that served as her “primary point of reference.” (Bharucha 1995, 2009). This was unlike Contemporary Indian Dancers today who use many movement styles, Indian and Western. Chandra’s innovations remain profoundly influential for today’s artists, including her collaborative spirit that enabled her to work with dancer-choreographers, musicians, visual artists and poets – this was not as common in the 1970s as it is today.

Along with rejecting bharatanatyam’s religious representations, Chandra also moved away from bharatanatyam’s mythological and narrative bases relying on *nayikas* (heroines) pining for the *nayakas* (heroes) expressed in the gesture language of *abhinaya*. Her non-narrative, abstract work is fully absorbing, not distant and cold, contrary to the charge that her performances lacked *rasa* (emotion). Chandra “demonstrated that *rasa* need not be yoked to narrative alone, but it can be evoked at more abstract levels” (Bharucha, *Chandralekha: Woman...*). Indeed, Chandra’s insightful separation of *rasa* from narrative is path breaking as its legacy continues today in Contemporary choreography like Astad Deboo’s, or Shobana Jeyasingh’s who evoke *rasa* via abstract dance.

Chandra's move away from bharatanatyam's reliance on myth and narrative also enabled her to connect dance and life: "The internal relation between the dance and the dancer" she remarked, "and the external relation between dance and society are questions that cannot be taken lightly." (Chandralekha 1984) Today's Contemporary Indian Dancers create works about their social realities such as domestic and communal violence, and gender inequities.

Chandra reflected and built upon, critiqued, dismantled and restructured from within the forms of bharatanatyam and kalari martial arts. She realized that she must not only reinvent bharatanatyam from the inside but also the very "ideological base [of bharatanatyam] in terms of patriarchal and Brahmanical premises" (Bharucha, *Chandralekha: Woman...*) The goal of making tradition itself modern was a life-long process expressed in Chandra's many choreographic works. Her work demonstrated "how Indian dance can be modern on its own terms without borrowing from the West" (Program Notes, *Sharira*, New Delhi, 2009). Many Contemporary Indian dancers reflect this sentiment.

As Chandra worked with and departed from "the exclusive classicism of Bharata Natyam," she faced many questions:

how to explore, expand, universalize the form; how to comprehend its inherent energy content; how to see it in relation to other allied physical disciplines in India – like yoga, ancient martial arts ... how to interpret the purity of Bharata Natyam; its body geometry of squares, circles, triangles, coils, curves; how to visualize this body-geometry in terms of space-geometry ... how to slash across the dead weight of the 'past' suffocating dance in the name of 'tradition'; how to pare dance of its feudal and religious acculturations ... how to consolidate the conjunctions between our traditional forms and our contemporary concerns. (Chandra, *Reflections...*57–58)

Chandra's significant innovations have become iconic as they echo in the work of contemporary Indian dancers: minimalist and slowly unfolding movement, even a meditative quality is a signature of Contemporary Indian Dancers such as Anita Ratnam among others; abstract concepts rendered in dance by Aditi Mangaldas's choreography in *Timeless*, Lata Pada's *shunya* (zero/silence), Anita Ratnam's *7 graces*; *nrtta* with *rasa* in Astad Deboo's *ContraPosition*, in Akram Khan's *zero degrees*; inventive use of *solkettu* (syllables used in Indian dance movement) not for *nrtta* (foot-work) but for *abhinaya* (gesture language) in Hari Krishnan's *Owning Shadows*; choreographic explorations of the human body in Natasha Bakht's *White Space*. Chandra's bold representations of the sexual, sensual and spiritual co-existing resonate among the Post Natyam Collective.

Chandra's work was bold though she was not bothered about creating something "contemporary." Taking risks without worrying about the outcome was her method—this may be one of the true meanings of dancing on the edge. Her contributions are monumental for Contemporary Indian dancers; her genius gave new bodily meanings to abstract concepts of time and space, sensuality, sexuality and spirituality.

Transnational Collaborations: Anita Ratnam and Hari Krishnan

Chandra's unique inventions of Indian dance from within, her use of abstract movement aligning the body's sensual and spiritual capacities are continued and taken further artistically and across national borders in collaborations between Chennai-based Anita Ratnam, and Toronto-based Hari Krishnan, both trained in bharatanatyam.

Ratnam is remarkably multi-talented – dancer-choreographer, cultural commentator, producer, presenter, publisher, and writer. I describe her as an ethno-global artist – as

one who is firmly grounded in her own Tamil and pan-Indian cultural, social, religious ambience along with global openness in artistic work (Katrak 2009). Prior to her Contemporary choreography, Ratnam was a well-received solo bharatanatyam performer before she left her hometown of Chennai for New York City after marriage. During 10 years (1980–1990) there, she worked as a television commentator, and a successful producer of TV shows like the Festival of India among others. While in New York, Ratnam stayed away from dance and when she returned to India she did not want to return to the solo performance circuit. Rather, she explored other movement vocabularies while remaining rooted in her Tamil cultural, musical and artistic tradition. She was interested in bringing new creative energy to traditional dance forms and to undertake cross-cultural collaborations, festivals and to showcase new talent. She established Arangham Dance Company and Foundation in 1992.

Raised in Singapore, Hari Krishnan, born into a family that practiced classical Carnatic music and dance, was steeped in bharatanatyam from a young age. His bharatanatyam guru was the late Kittappa Pillai. Krishnan always asserts the modernity of bharatanatyam and its global practice today as “a signifier of South Asian identity.” The bedrock of his creative ventures into other dance vocabularies and his adventurous collaborations remain in what he describes as “the contemporary abstractions of bharatanatyam.”

Krishnan is the Artistic Director of InDance Company, based in Toronto since 1999, bringing together distinctly multi-ethnic dancers of South Asian, Chinese, Japanese, and Canadian origins. Krishnan also founded the Mangala Initiative, a non-profit Canadian organization that offers financial assistance to female artists in rural Tamil Nadu. Though based in Toronto, Krishnan has been Artist in Residence at Wesleyan University in the United States since 2000, where he teaches bharatanatyam and lectures “on the postcolonial experience” as he puts it, “as well as on the global contemporary manifestations of South Asian dance” (In Dance publicity materials).

Ratnam’s Contemporary choreography is rooted in what she calls “the feminine transcendental.” She redefines the sacred, different from traditional bharatanatyam’s *bhakti* (devotion). Even as she explores religious and mythological figures, they are situated firmly in her contemporary urban experience as an Indian woman and a feminist. For instance, in *A Million Sita-s*, she contemporizes *The Ramayana*’s heroine Sita; in her signature piece, *7 graces*, Ratnam references the Tibetan goddess of compassion, Tara, not literally but through her special universal connection to the female body and femininity.

Ratnam described aptly as a “contemporary classicist” has evolved a signature style from what she terms the “parallel mythology” of Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan goddesses expressed in a variety of movement vocabularies. Ratnam calls her style of Contemporary Indian Dance “Neo-Bharatam, a form that is the synergy of all my classical and meditative movement techniques, flavored by my life experience as an Indian woman” (Ratnam 2008). Neo-Bharatam retains the notion of the new along with her base in bharatanatyam and Indian aesthetics of color, music, and affect.

Krishnan’s hybrid choreography subverts cultural, national, and gender stereotypes both seriously and humorously in works such as *Recipes for Curry*, *Bollywood Hopscotch* among others. In *Owning Shadows* (discussed below) Krishnan draws upon a *Ramayana* segment but instead of narrative, he uses abstract movement (as also in Ratnam’s *7 graces* that Krishnan directed), to convey the dark side of human nature embodied in the emotions of lust and greed via the story of Surpanakha, the demoness who desires Rama urging him to leave his wife Sita.

Krishnan engages creatively with what he calls “vintage bharatanatyam” wherein his choreography is linked to the spiritual in his devout dedication to learning *devadasi* dance

items from surviving hereditary practitioners. He has “reconstructed several vintage temple and court dance genres” in the Thanjavur tradition, learning temple-dance repertoires from the last surviving member of the hereditary female dance community from the Tiruvarur temple in South India (Interview with Lalitha Venkat, August 7, 2005). He is the only dancer to have inherited the entire repertoire of the Viralimalai temple tradition from R. Muttukkannammal, the last *devadasi* to be dedicated at the Murugan temple in Viralimalai. Krishnan’s contemporary immersion in this historical recuperation of *devadasi* contributions, of *nattuvanars* and their families, enables him to pass down this legacy to his InDance Company – beautifully showcased in June 2010 at a “SoloDance Symposium” that he co-curated with Daves Soneji at Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). It is heartening to see that some part of the *devadasi* repertoire is alive in the bodies of these young Canadians of Indian, Japanese, and Caucasian ancestries.

Contemporary renditions of *devadasi* repertoire harkens to the origins of *devadasi* dance. At the same time, this representation by contemporary InDance artists is different from the original *devadasis* since these contemporary artists do not belong to the *devadasis*’ hereditary community nor do they necessarily share their Hindu religious beliefs. On their modern bodies, the *devadasi* dances’ spirituality is decoded by evoking a contemporary sensibility that inhabits spirituality differently than *devadasis* of a previous era. Such evocation of a different time and space into modern, urban Toronto provides the audience with a unique flavor of a spiritual (though not necessarily Hindu) mixed with a contemporary multi-ethnic flavor. Here, indeed, a universalized spirituality, as in our common sharing of human breath (as in yoga), and universal human emotions such as love, fear, among others (described in the ancient text, *The Natyasastra* as the *navarasas*, i.e. the nine primary human emotions) come to the fore.

Krishnan’s and Ratnam’s personal histories and over 30 year dance careers have brought them to an artistic place where they collaborate transnationally between Chennai and Toronto, or London (where Krishnan serves as mentor during summer workshops, “Unlocking Creativity” by the South Asian organization Kadam). Transcending national borders and different regions within the nation (such as urban to rural) is not only geographical for these artists; they also cross boundaries of traditional Indian dance forms transforming them from within. A creative commingling of local and global is found in their artistry. Ratnam, rooted in her indigenous Tamil context with ancestral links to her family village in Tirukurungudi, where she has revived a 13th century ritual theatre called *Kaisika Natanam* (Ratnam 2000). This 5-hour performance tells the story of a lowborn devotee called Nambaduvan who travels to the entrance of the Vishnu shrine and though he cannot enter given his low caste, he can sing in adoration of the Lord. A demon intercepts his journey, threatens to devour him and is later transformed by the devotion of Nambuduvan’s music. The demon is blessed and regains his normal human shape. The story underlines the power of music and the force of single-minded devotion.

While both Ratnam and Krishnan retain a deep resonance of bharatanatyam in their work, they bring a unique contemporary sensibility to their hybrid dance language of Contemporary Indian Dance, namely, transforming bharatanatyam from within, creating inventive palimpsests of movement vocabularies from India and the West, and fashioning striking visual, spatial, facial (bold refashioning of traditional *abhinaya*, or using *nrtta* rather than lyric poetry as in traditional bharatanatyam to convey emotion) and aural effects. Their creative choreography is marked by their bold deployment of hybridity in movement vocabularies including minimalism, challenging stereotypes of gender and sexuality, and collaborating across national boundaries. Their creative work is illuminated via theorization of the concepts of hybridity, modernity, and transnational feminism.

Ratnam's *reinterpretation of the sacred*, drawing energy from Indian female goddess traditions that are recuperated uniquely is the cornerstone of her contributions to Contemporary Indian Dance. The sacred in her hands transcends narrow religious and regional frameworks to touch humanity in any culture, bearing a meditative quality, a yoga-like life-energy that links human beings even through the commonality of the breath. This sacred feeling is also part of our collective unconscious in the Jungian sense. While universal, Ratnam also grounds the sacred for herself in the local, regional, and ritual traditions of her Tamil heritage without narrowly limiting it.

The sacred is accompanied often in many traditions, and certainly in India, with the sensual as expressed via color, decoration, and the fragrance of flowers or incense. Hence, even as Ratnam's interpretation of the sacred steps away from narrow religiosity, she evokes an Indian aesthetic resonance in her bold and careful embrace of *aharya* (decoration) in her contemporary dance. She does not reject color and ornamentation as some Contemporary Indian Dancers do, drawing attention only to the body. But Ratnam delights in the sensuality of the spiritual, part of Indian aesthetic tradition.

Ratnam brings her own unique perspective on tradition, seeking the in-between spaces and deliberate breaks of movement in order to work against what she calls "a closure" in classical *bharatanatyam*, and embodies hybridity in her work. Ratnam's engagement with tradition includes incorporating ritual, liturgical Tamil poetry, along with a vibrant contemporaneity.

Ratnam is recognized for "redefining *bharatanatyam* as a global style – a transcultural experience" (*The Hindu*, May 22, 2000). "I was always drawn to the idea of turning *Bharatanatyam* on its head," she remarks. "My larger agenda is to create a new audience, a younger audience for Indian dance. I fear we are losing an audience who is alienated and intimidated by its formalism" (*The Hindu*, September 26, 2002).

Ratnam's art has a distinctively female, even feminist thrust. Her notion of the "female transcendental" reaches into a global feminist consciousness that remains cognizant of gender inequality even as it reaches for a specifically female spiritual quality, such as in her choreography about female mystic poet-saints such as Meera or Andaal. In such works, Ratnam contributes uniquely to the evolving language of Contemporary Indian dance.

Ratnam's Contemporary Indian Dance since the 1990s redefines the sacred making it relevant for our times, enabling viewers to differentiate between sacredness and religiosity. External manifestations via statues of deities, incense, and flowers are not part of Ratnam's idea of the sacred; rather, she evokes the divine within each individual and draws her audience into connecting with this sentiment in their own personal ways, inviting them to move into an inner quiet space as they lose awareness of their mundane everyday lives and attempt to transcend their limited egos. This concept of sacred becomes personal, female, familial, even reaching towards a wider humanity that touches diverse audiences with varied beliefs of the sacred or even none at all.

The coming together of sacredness and faith, faith and thought, belief and discourse, while seemingly paradoxical, works congruently within Indian aesthetics. Ratnam embraces *bhakti* (devotion equally for a deity as for a lover or a child) as sacred, thought-based, and thought provocative rather than a sense of blind devotion. Ratnam explores Indian Tantric philosophy and its delineation of *chakras* in the human body in *Adhirohana* (*The Ascent*, 1998) where she evokes how human energy moves from the *kundalini* energy at the base of the spine to the *shirsasana chakra* at the top of the head. In this piece, as in another more recent work, *Neelam* (2006), Ratnam uses *mandalas* that invigorate geometrical patterns with sacred connotations. On stage, she uses square stools, and other shapes such as triangles to invoke energy that comes through *mandalas*.

Ratnam's linking of spirituality with the female archetype (goddess, mystic) is represented in her dance work, *Naachiyaar* (2001) that began her crossing the borders of different mythological and goddess traditions. *Naachiyaar* retells the story of the ninth-century female mystic poet Andaal whose passion for Krishna is expressed sensually in the famous ten verses addressed to the conch that Krishna's sweet lips have touched. In one of the verses, Ratnam portrays Andaal's physical and spiritual anguish as she addresses the conch that was blessed by Krishna's lips. Andaal asks the conch, how do Krishna's lips smell? Do they have the fragrance of camphor or lotus? The final segment culminates in an explicit sexual fantasy of a bridal procession and its group of dancers. In order to visually narrate this dream, Ratnam converts a long, unstitched piece of fabric into a flute, a garland, and a conch (*The Statesman*, May 9, 2003). The erotic sensuality coalesces with the spiritual.

The goddess motif reappears in subsequent works: *Devi*, and *Utpala* (2004). In *7 Graces* (2005), Ratnam draws subtly on compassionate goddess Tara as a reference point rather than literally, to suggest female energy of the womb and the pain of childbirth. The dance offers numerous configurations of the mystical number "7" along with the *navarasas* that Ratnam dramatizes vividly on her face along with Buddhist liturgical hand *mudras*, Tibetan gongs, and Carnatic vocals mingled with Western style piano.

Ratnam balances motion with stillness and silence in *Daughters of the Ocean*, and her work after this increasingly plays with silence. Audiences used to traditional Indian dance are very uncomfortable with pin-drop silence. Ratnam believes that this piece delineates "a style of performance art for the Indian context, unique to the modern Indian experience."

Another collaborative work between Ratnam and Krishnan provocatively entitled, *Ma3Ka* continues an exploration of the sacred, drawing upon goddess icons in Ratnam's unique way via the female goddess and "female imagery" (Swaminathan 2009). "Dance is my attempt to populate my world with interesting women. Some of them are those we recognize as goddesses," notes Ratnam. "They have mischief, rage, anger, they can kill, protect, laugh, they have sensual power. They are I hope enigmatic, complete, intelligent and passionate" (Kreisberger 2010). Ratnam's choreography intertwines the spiritual and sensual, even representing the sensual *in* the spiritual; sensuality encompasses everything that appeals to the five senses and physical sex is only one expression of this.

Ma3Ka represents the trinity of Indian goddesses, Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Meenakshi, as well as the women in Anita's family – her 97-year-old grandmother, her late mother, and her daughter in her 20's. Anita dances within a triangle drawn on stage and the concept of the number three pervades the work. The costume designer Rex comments: "the nuanced interpretations and abstractions are sewn into the fabric of the work." The Lakshmi section features a sequence of runway model walks, as Anita paces through various personas she has held during her life – model, stage actor, and film personality. The work has a rich visual design that connects the "ancient, modern, timeless, specific."

For an ethno-global artist such as Ratnam, both feeling and thought underlie the sacred. Ratnam concerns herself less with authenticity in a particular ritualistic practice than she does with a personal, hybrid spirituality, where the collaging of different religious traditions animate her dancing body on stage. Ratnam seeks *ananda*, when the human soul even fleetingly tastes the nectar of the divine, or at the very least, a transcendent feeling beyond the human, that heightened aesthetic experience that can spark divine joy. Ratnam seeks this effect through stillness and silence, the yogic qualities of *sthira* (calm strength) and *sukha* (gentle softness) in her choreography.

Like Ratnam, Hari Krishnan's art, described as "holistic," combines bharatanatyam's vocabulary and music with "contemporary, urban, post-modern culture," as Lalitha Venkat notes (narthaki.com, 7 August 2005). "What really interests Krishnan," remarks *Here and Now's* commentator "is the world we live in today and the possibilities for taking an ancient dance tradition and giving it contemporary relevance, even making it a way to comment on the very notion of cultural identity" (Crabb 2007). In a dance work provocatively entitled *Recipes for Curry*, Krishnan "uses contemporary styles of Bharatanatyam," notes Crabb, "in an almost subversive way to illustrate perceptions of race, culture, and heritage." This challenging approach is evident in much of Krishnan's choreography. In the duet he performed with Allan Kaeja in *Yogurt and Venom*, a work that he calls a "multilingual dialect," he notes: "it's like we are creating a hybrid space, something that combines contact improvisation and Bharatanatyam" (Sumi 2007).

Krishnan's signature style of Contemporary Indian Dance is distinctly hybrid, evoking that no one dance style or culture is totally pure or authentic; every culture (even if not overtly colonized) has elements of being mixed, with different influences having an impact on identity formations.

Among Krishnan's many choreographed works *Owning Shadows* is inspired by the demoness Surpanakha's story in *The Ramayana* where she lusts for Rama. Krishnan abstracts from Surpanakha's lust to explore the seamy side of human nature leaving much to the audience's imagination. A non-narrative, abstract movement style evokes universal resonances of human desire, lust and greed. Indeed, Krishnan acknowledges, even "owns" the dark side of human nature, as the title suggests. He demonstrates the abstract notion of good and evil as co-existing in each individual by making the two bodies on stage move at times back to back as if to portray one body. At times, they split apart as they enact one emotion or another.

Surpanakha, the ten-headed demon Ravana's sister is a crucial catalyst in the epic since when Rama spurns this demoness' love, dismisses it as lust, teases her, and with his brother Lakshmana's help cuts off her nose, Surpanakha reports this humiliation to Ravana who then abducts Sita. In *Owning Shadows*, Surpanakha's externalized lust evokes Sita's internalized, undemonstrated desire. Even as Sita rejects that ugly side, it is a part of her. By the same token, even the demoness feels love for Rama, however incongruous. Arshia Sattar, in a recent volume entitled, *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*, argues: "Sita and Surpanakha exemplify two types of women who appear almost universally in folklore and mythology. Sita is good, pure, light, auspicious and subordinate, whereas Surpanakha is evil, impure, dark, inauspicious and insubordinate. Although male characters can also be divided into the good and the bad, the split between women characters is far more pronounced and is always expressed in terms of sexuality" (Sattar 2009).

In conclusion, the contemporary choreography of Chandralekha, Ratnam, and Krishnan drawing upon the body's potential for abstract and hybrid movement, along with reinterpretations of well-known Indian epic stories and goddess tales brings fresh insights not only in the field of Contemporary Dance, but also Religious and South Asian Studies. The historical "revival" of bharatanatyam that emphasized its spiritual over its sensual aspects as practiced in the spiritual-sensual continuum by the *devadasis* is recuperated via the creative imagination and choreography by artists like Anita Ratnam and Hari Krishnan discussed here among other artists working in the genre of Contemporary Indian Dance. Re-inventing a classical dance form like bharatanatyam, placing it in conversation with Indian martial arts traditions as Chandralekha did so successfully, and in conjunction with movement vocabularies from across the globe infuses it with new creative energy that has the depth and profundity of a devotional base. Indeed, Contemporary Indian

Dancers' re-interpretations of religious icons and mythological stories make these ancient tales and goddesses speak from a bygone era to today's audiences with deep resonance, devotion and vibrancy.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ The eight classical styles include bharatanatyam, kuchipudi, kathakali, mohiniattam from Southern India, kathak from the North, odissi, manipuri, and sattriya from Eastern areas.

² *Devadasi* practice was found also in other parts of India such as in Orissa. A similar history is significant for a study of the North Indian classical style of kathak (see Chakravorty 2008).

³ Peterson and Soneji (2008), 6. Hereafter, citations from this text are indicated by *Performing Pasts*.

⁴ Among the most renowned rulers was Serfoji II (1879–1832) who fostered learning especially encouraging music and dance.

⁵ Prior to the establishment of the Madras presidency by the British in 1685, continuing until Indian independence in 1947, the golden age of the Cholas and Pandyas prevailed. The British East India Company had been trading since 1600. However, the Company was disbanded after the 1857 Mutiny against the British and Queen Victoria officially declared British Raj over the territory.

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